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Moderate and Radical Islam

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Terrorism and Radical Islam Gap Panel on November 3, 2005

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Committee on Armed Services
Defense Review Terrorism and Radical Islam Gap Panel
United States House of Representatives

November 3, 2005

I would like to thank the Terrorism and Radical Islam Gap Panel for inviting me to testify on this very important subject. As a Senior Policy Analyst in the RAND Corporation I have been working for several years on the subject of Political Islam. Last December we published a major work, *The Muslim World After 9/11*, that has been distributed to members of the Panel, and that addresses the trends that are most likely to affect U.S. security and interests in this vast part of the world.

RADICAL AND MODERATE ISLAM

One of the components of this study is relevant to a question that I was asked to address, which is how radical Islam differs from moderate or mainstream Islam. Frankly, one of the problems that we have found in the discourse about Islam is that the terms “radical” or “moderate” are often used in a subjective and imprecise way, without going through a process of critically examining what these terms mean. In some cases, the term radical or militant is defined in terms of support for terrorism or other forms of violence. We believe that this is too narrow a focus, that there is, in fact, a much larger universe of fundamentalist or Salafi groups who may not themselves practice violence, but that propagate an ideology that creates the conditions for violence and that is subversive of the values of democratic societies.

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In short, the willingness to use or justify violence to attain political objectives is one element of what separates radical from moderate Muslims—a very important element, but only one element nonetheless. This is why in our study we take a broader view of what constitutes radical Islam. We contend that, in order to confront Islamist terrorism effectively, there is a need to address the ideological aspect of radicalization.

In our analysis, we have developed a framework to differentiate Muslim religious and political currents according to their overarching ideologies; their preferred forms of government (do they seek to establish an Islamic state or are they willing to accept secular forms of government?); their political and legal orientation (do they insist on the application of Islamic or sharia law, or do they accept other sources of law?); their attitudes toward the rights of women and religious minorities (do they deny women equal rights, including the right to political participation? Do they support the education and advancement of women? Would they allow freedom of worship?).

Based on their positions on these marker issues, as we call them, Muslim groups and even individuals fall within a spectrum that has, at one end, moderates who advocate democracy and tolerance and reject violence as a means to attain political goals and, at the other end, radicals who oppose democratic and pluralistic values and embrace violence. This typology can help policymakers identify potential partners in the Muslim world to promote democracy and pluralism and counter the influence of extremist and violent tendencies.

SOURCES OF RADICAL INFLUENCE

Now we can turn to the issue of what accounts for the influence of radicals in what is essentially a war of ideas within the Muslim world. As scholars such as Hillel Fradkin have noted, this understanding conforms to that of Islamist terrorists themselves, for they declare that their enemies are both Muslims and non-Muslims, the “near enemy” and the “far enemy,” the former being apostates and agents of the latter.

Radicals are a minority almost everywhere in Muslim world. In the last Indonesian parliamentary elections, in April of last year, the explicitly Islamic parties got less than 20 percent of the vote, while secular parties received almost 50 percent. Even in

Pakistan, in the 2002 National Assembly elections, the militant Islamic coalition MMA party only received some 11 percent of the vote nationally, even though the Islamists did emerge as the largest bloc in two provinces bordering on Afghanistan, the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan.

Nevertheless, radicals have the advantage because they have developed extensive networks, spanning the Muslim world and sometimes reaching beyond it. Liberal and moderate Muslims, although a majority in almost all countries, have not created similar networks. Muslim moderates feel exposed and isolated. Their voices are often fractured or silenced. Even in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim majority country, where moderate Islam is the norm, aside from the latest terrorist attack in Bali, there has been over the past year a spate of extremist violence and threats of violence against Christian churches, small dissident Muslim sects, and liberal Muslim organizations.

Extremists have been able to exercise disproportionate influence because moderates are often unwilling to confront them. One reason is that while radicals are perfectly willing to excommunicate their opponents—this is the concept of takfir—Moderates do not believe that Muslims should excommunicate other Muslims. In fact, I am aware of only one Muslim organization that has excommunicated bin Laden and his organization as un-Islamic that was done by Mansur Escudero in his capacity of co-chairman of the Islamic Commission of Spain. In that respect the fatwa against terrorism issued by North American-based Muslim organizations following the London bombings does not condemn bin Laden and al-Qaeda terrorists by name and therefore it is deficient.

There is also fear of the consequences of taking on the radicals. In many parts of the Muslim world the radicals have been generally successful in justifying terrorism as part of a struggle between Islam and the West. Concern about being portrayed as proxies for Western interests inhibits some moderate Muslims from openly opposing the radicals. And finally there is the fear of violence. When I was in Jakarta in August my friend Ulil Abshar Abdalla, a leading Indonesian moderate Muslim, was playing to me death threats that he had received on his cell phone after the Indonesian Ulema Council, an organization controlled by radicals, issued a fatwa condemning secularism, pluralism, and liberal Islam.

The prevalence of authoritarian political systems, especially in the Arab world, is a source of strength for radicals. In the absence of channels for the expression of legitimate political dissent, such as genuine opposition political parties, those who are disaffected with the status quo—and they have much to be disaffected with—turn to the mosque and to underground Islamist organizations as political alternatives to the ruling circles.

There are also more practical reasons for the success of radical groups in gaining the ideological upper hand. One is the effect of decades of Saudi funding and export of their intolerant version of Islam. Funding and influences from the Middle East have been a major factor in fostering radicalization in Muslim regions and populations outside of the Arab world.

RADICAL RECRUITMENT

Another reason for the spread of radical Islamist groups is their aggressive and sophisticated recruitment techniques. The targets are separate potential pools of recruits, each requiring different methods and venues for recruitment. The key recruitment nodes are mosques and Islamic study circles; schools, universities, and youth organizations; health and welfare organizations, including charities; and other social clusters.

Recruitment methodologies vary: in universities, for instance, the process involves Quranic study groups or circles where members gradually internalize the ideology of the group. In economically and socially marginalized districts, such as the slums of Algiers, for instance, recruits might be willing to join the extremist group out of sheer frustration with their condition in life.

A description of radical recruitment techniques was given by one of our sources in Kuwait. Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi groups begin by picking up young boys twelve or thirteen years old. An older teenage member will befriend them, involve them in sports and other youth activities. He will ask them to join in group prayers at a mosque after classes. He will then begin to teach them the radicals' version of Islam and tell them terrifying tales of life after death and the Day of Judgment. In a few years many of the youth are fully committed and ready to commit violence in the service of the cause. Some even decide that their Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi mentors are not Islamic enough and join more violent or terrorist groups. There is an observable progression in individuals

who join terrorist organizations from militant to more radical activity and eventually to terrorism.

In Western Europe, jihadist groups are embedded in the broader Muslim communities and take advantage of the disaffection of alienated sectors of the Muslim population. Second generation British Muslims, born and educated in Great Britain are responsible for the majority of terrorist acts by British Muslims outside of Great Britain and for the July 7, 2005 London bombings. Similarly, the assassin of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh was a second-generation Dutch Muslim of Moroccan ancestry.

THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE AS A RECRUITMENT TOOL

I should mention that violence itself plays a role in recruitment. International jihadists have become involved in conflicts from Chechnya and Kashmir to Mindanao and the Moluccas, ostensibly to help beleaguered Muslims in these regions, but to gain credibility among the broader Muslim communities and especially among the young people that they hope to entice into joining and also because these local jihads provide new members with a “rite of passage” which is the functional equivalent of the founding generation’s experience in Afghanistan.

In conclusion, the challenge that we face in confronting radical Islam is commensurate with the challenge that the United States and the West faced during the Cold War, but perhaps it is even more complex in its social and ideological components.